The value and meaning of physicality in non-digital sport and video games. From Pistorius to the Witcher

Wartość i znaczenie cielesności w sporcie analogowym i grach wideo. Od Pistoriusa do Wiedźmina

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Słowa kluczowe
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Abstract
Since the second half of the twentieth century, sport has reflected crucial changes in the cultural valuation and perception of human physicality. The axiological breakthrough that has begun in the sphere of sport is currently noticeable in the dynamically developing world of computer games, especially those with so called open worlds. The article subjects to a preliminary analysis two phenomena evidencing that: accepting in the sphere of Olympic sport disabled contestants (on the example of the runner O. Pistorius) and the ability to impersonate Geralt of Rivia, the main character in the game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt.*

Abstrakt
W sporcie od drugiej połowy XX wieku odzwierciedlają się istotne zmiany w kulturowym wartościowaniu i postrzeganiu ludzkiej cielesności. Zapoczątkowany w obszarze sportu przełom aksjologiczny jest obecnie zauważalny w dynamicznie rozwijającej się dziedzinie gier komputerowych, szczególnie z tzw. otwartymi światami. W artykule poddano wstępnej analizie dwa fenomeny, które o tym świadczą. Włączenie w obszar sportu olimpijskiego sportu osób niepełnosprawnych (przykład biegacza O. Pistoriusa) oraz możliwość wcielenia się w Geralta z Rivii, głównego bohatera gry *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*.

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The present article assumes a hypothesis that since the second half of the twentieth century, the phenomenon called sport has reflected crucial changes in the cultural valuation and perception of human physicality. The axiological breakthrough that has begun in the sphere of sport is currently noticeable in a dynamically developing branch of entertainment but also of art, which is computer games, joining different means of expression in their artistic creation. The term sport is here understood more in the context of extreme, professional, qualified sport than recreation or tourism. In this sense, running or cycling around the park is a physical activity and a form or recreation, and if we do it in a new place, might even be a sports tourism, but is not a sport in the basic meaning of the world. It is worth remembering that sometimes the use of the term entirely loses its sense, for example in the Polish People's Republic a brand of cigarettes was called "Sport".

As an example, the article subjects to preliminary analysis two phenomena: the first was formal acknowledgment of the sport of the disabled that took place in the second half of the twentieth century, together with its far-going consequences, such as the appearance of special prostheses of the organs of movement, thanks to which contestants with disabilities started to obtain results close to the able-bodied contestants, or even to compete with them, e.g. the South African runner Oscar Pistorius. The second one is the appearance, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, of computer games, in which the environment of the gamer's activity is defined as an open world, and the storyline is not linear. The article uses the example of a cRPG[1] *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015)[2], set in the so-called literary universe of the adventures of Geralt of Rivia, a hero created by Andrzej Sapkowski in the Witcher cycle[3]. The game does not recreate the episodes from the books and stories, but allows us to impersonate (create a so-called simulacrum of) the White Wolf, who makes his choices in the world of the game and undertakes acts (not necessary for finishing the game), thus shaping a personality and

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[1]   Computer Role-Playing Game is a type of role-playing games in which reality is created on PCs. A player usually takes on a part of a given character and by making choices and performing acts creates and develops the features of his character. This type of games can be in a single-player mode, like the cited game The Witcher 3, or in a multi-player mode.

[2]   *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Project RED, 2015.

[3]   Compare: A. Sapkowski, *Wiedźmin* [*The Witcher*], t. 1–8, Warszawa 2015.

physicality individual and unique for each player. The Witcher 3 is an exceptional game, as in Sapkowski's prose Geralt is a well-formed character, both in his viewpoint and his ethics. A player can be aware of that if he knows the literary character; but he doesn't have to, which, naturally, leads to creating various relations in the triad Geralt (a literary character) – a player – Geralt (the game character).

Today sport creates, to a varying degree, and subsequently mediates a relationship between a person/ a subject of a contestant and the environment of the contest and in this respect resembles a part of cRPG computer games; the basic difference consist in the fact that a player does not exist in the world of the game in his physical body. In other words, the type of the relationship constituting sport is tied to the way of construing and valuating physicality. The twentieth century sport evolved from the simple relationship of direct physical presence of a player at a sporting event to the scattered forms of competition in the digitally generated 0-dimensional space in esports[4] which, however, are not accepted by all researchers as a form of sport[5]. Therefore, it is possible to take part in a sporting event remotely, without using one's body directly to compete, which is physically impossible in the so-called cyberspace. Obviously, the persons of gamers can be simultaneously present on stage (arena), sitting by their computers like musicians by their instruments during concerts; however, the characters they guide, their avatars, exist and compete in the digitally generated world on a given game server. After the game is finished and the electricity switched off, the avatar ceases to exist, unlike the human competitor who guided it. In this sense, a new game will bring a new avatar to "life". It is also a fundamental difference to the postulated existence of a simulacrum, which does not cease to exist when the power is switched of and a player can play it whenever he wants to plunge into the digital world of the game again.

Accepting a given activity or event as a sport is a result of the given culture's system of values, and not of immanent features of the phenomenon itself, e.g. currently some call killing animals for pleasure a sport, which is absurd from the point of view of fair play spirit and probably all European humanistic values. In the twentieth century western countries accepted the sport of people with disabilities and raised it to the rank of Olympic sport

(Rome 1960). It was a result of the process of re-evaluation of perception of people with disabilities in the course of cultural, not sport-related changes.

The present study assumes that a similar cultural re-evaluation might be observed now and this time it is connected with the development of advanced computer games, or, to be more precise, the culture of video games, as the players do not only play but also dress up as characters from the games (cosplay), and on the basis of those games feature drama films are created and books are written.

The definition of sport includes three constitutive elements: the person of a player, the environment of the contest and the relationship binding the contestant to the place where the sport is practiced. Sport is realized through sporting events, which can be interpreted in semiotic processes, generating meaning and values in the sphere of culture[6]. While the first two elements are rather clearly defined in case of the non-digital sport, e.g. a runner – a course; a footballer – a pitch; a swimmer – a pool, etc., the relationship binding the sportsperson to the place where sport is realized can take on different forms, previously unknown and made possible due to modern technologies, e.g. in esports or – as it was the case with people with disabilities – due to re-evaluation of the meaning of physicality, which enforced changes such as e.g. specially modified pitches for disabled contestants on wheelchairs.

Until the 1960s, sport had been perceived as the temple of normative healthy physicality. Even now some people still believe that "sport is good for you", and the contestants thanks to practicing sport become particularly healthy people or even paragons of healthy image. However, looking closer at the sport ecosystem, one may detect disquieting phenomena, directly contradicting the image of sport as a way to be healthy. There are known cases of sportspeople, footballers, runners dying while taking part in a sporting event. Both ancient Olympic games and the modern ones modeled on them, until the Paralympic games in Rome in 1960, were accessible only to able-bodied contestants constituting a model of an ideal body in culture. People with disabilities obviously practiced sport long before 1960, especially young men with injuries from the tragic world wars. Before the world wars the problem of partially disabled but at the same time healthy and strong people had not occurred in Western societies on such a scale. For war invalids, rehabilitation consisting in monotonous exercises was boring and unmotivating, deprived of the element of competition and opportunities to demonstrate their limited but existing dexterity and strength. Additionally, it was conducted in dedi-

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[6]   Semiotically generative power of signs from the sphere of sport could be well illustrated by so called Kozakiewicz's gesture, widely recognisable even by people uninterested in sport.

cated centers and special hospital wards, which was detrimental to integration, re-joining active life and contacts with able-bodied persons who could witness the fact that a bodily dysfunction does not equal being sentenced to isolation from the rest of the society. In such a situation, games and sports properly modified and adapted for people with disabilities became attractive and added variety to the rehabilitation process. There was, however, no obstacle for such physical activity to shift focus towards competition, having as its goal victory, i.e. the purpose of a professional sportsperson. It also turned out that watching a competition between contestants with disabilities can be interesting for the audience and the fans. A lack of a limb, or even limbs, no longer excluded from sport; it was enough to diminish the meaning of the culturally rooted paragon of normative physicality.

Is, however, the sport of the disabled essentially the same sport as the traditional sport of the able-bodied? It is if we remember the variety of goals adopted by people undertaking the activity commonly denominated as sport. The term sport may refer to a competition between contestants (performing sport) or to the contestation of previously achieved results, e.g. in swimming, jumping, running, etc. (contesting sport). In performing sports the crucial thing is the victory over an opponent; usually these are team sports, and a good example is football, where even one-goal victory counts. In contesting sports the most important is breaking the record, especially the world record; a good example is an extremely prestigious men's 100 metres run[7]. The goal of sport understood in such a way is victory, or setting a new record, and not such things as realizing ethical and moral values, the rule of fair play in particular; nor is the goal recreation, healthy lifestyle, physical fitness (like in fitness classes of every possible kind) or rehabilitation. Axiological equality between the sport of the disabled and of the able-bodied does not translate into the equal popularity of those teleologically identical phenomena[8]. The popularity of the Paralympic Games does not match the popularity of the Olympic Games for the able-bodied, although the situation is not the same

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[8] I purposefully omit here other factors defining a sport, such as clear and uniformly observed by the contestants rules, the legal status of sporting associations entered in the National Court Register in Poland, etc.

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everywhere; i.e. in some countries the Paralympic Games are broadcast live by TVs with national coverage and boast full audiences[9].

Young physically handicapped men had no intention of giving up their active lives and assuming the role of an invalid. For them, sport was a manifestation of strength and the fighting spirit inhabiting partially limited body. Thus, wars resulted in an unexpected and delayed effect of a crack in the mirror of sport, which so far had reflected only perfectly toned bodies. The mentioned breakthrough, or even a revolution, was axiological in its character, as accepting in Olympic sport people with disabilities was caused by the acceptance of physicality deviating from traditional norms.

Accepting the ability of the disabled physicality to take part in sporting competition opened the way to the conscious shaping of one's subjectivity. Modern technology entered the world of the able-bodied sport, perfecting the facilities and accessories used by contestants and obviously evoking a lot of problems and disputes as to what should and what should not be allowed. However, a true revolution happened in the sport of the disabled, transforming a disability into super-ability on the running course. Oscar Pistorius's long lost (at the age of one) legs were replaced with prostheses which turned out so efficient that he could compete with the best able-bodied runners. Soon voices appeared quoting various research that showed that the prostheses the South African runner used, i.e. technology, actually gave him a considerable advantage over a body with natural legs. Pistorius sued the International Association of Athletic Federations to the Arbitration Tribunal in the International Olympic Committee and won[10]. He was allowed to participate in the contests with able-bodied runners, however he did not qualify for the Beijing 2008 Games. He was able to take part in the contest only in the next Olympic Games in London 2012[11]. Nearly 50 years after the revolutionary for sport first Paralympic Games in Rome, the disability of sports people can be turned into super-ability which contests – to a degree – natural physicality. Thus the importance of model physicality, endorsed since ancient history of Europe by traditional sport petrifying natural and healthy (normative) body diminished, or even entirely disappeared.

How did computer games become the continuation of the above described process?

The dynamics of ontic and epistemological transformations in the world of digital creation (digital universe, semiosphere) caused even obvious terms

[9]   Polish public television (TVP) broadcasted live the Paralympic Games for the first time from Rio de Janeiro in 2016; what's more, the broadcast was given an attractive airtime.

[10]   Arbitration CAS 2008/A/1480 Pistorius v/ IAAF, award of 16 May 2008.

[11]   400 metres individually and 4x400 metres in relay race.

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like a computer game become broader in an unpredictable way. Currently, this term embraces both traditional forms of entertainment, taking its origin from simple video games, previously played on so called machines and now on smartphones and simple game consoles, as well as vast open worlds existing continuously and independently of a player's will, into which a player can enter and realize different strategies of developing his character (simulacrum) in a non-linear way and achieve chosen goals. The worlds of some games are maintained on the servers of various companies for years and are available round the clock. The character of a player is saved and each time he enters the game, he takes on his previous roles. The games that have their universes dedicated to net playing through the Internet, are usually called MMORPG (*Massively multiplayer online role-playing game*) or MMO (*Massively multiplayer online*). Open world games enable to shape the simulacrum into the image of the playing subject to an increasing degree, mirroring both real inclinations and the idealized ones, coveted by the player. My choices, such as killing in game a character guided by AI or destroying a given element of the environment, influence the simulacrum created by me and its reception in the game world. Of course, I can kill also other players and pay the consequences, but I can also cooperate with them, trade artifacts or defeat threats as a team. Also, I do not have to consider in depth the consequences of my deeds, but it is much more interesting to create a character who we want to become consciously and here digital worlds offer previously unknown possibilities. While creating simulacra in the game, we start from a basic identity, which we then try to fill in with content that fulfills our expectations, together with character traits, experience, and even certain appearance and physicality.

In 2016, a sentence trended on the Polish Internet: "I know a few people who played the game, but not many, as I surround myself with rather intelligent people"[12]. It was A. Sapkowski who commented with these words, at the fantasy lovers rally Polcon in Wrocław, on the games in which the main character is the most recognizable character of his prose, if not of the Polish prose in the world in general. What's more, the outstanding Polish writers believes that the popularity of the games about Wiedźmin (the Witcher) led to perceiving his works as secondary to the computer game character, which is not something to be pleased about.

> A gossip was spread – I don't know by whom, I suspect that by CD Projekt themselves – that but for the game, I would have never been translated for the

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[12]   In wyborcza.pl http://wyborcza.pl/7,75410,20616921,sapkowski-o-grze-wiedzmin-znam-niewiele-osob-ktore-w-to.html?disableRedirects=true (accessed 13.09.2020).

western Europe. Bullshit. All my translations were earlier than the game and it was the game that used my popularity, not the other way round[13].

Most of the commentators were and are indignant with Sapkowski's attitude, arguing that, among others, he strongly criticizes the players, while not having an idea what exactly the computer games using the Witcher universe are. Sapkowski seems to be treating the literary character as a carrier of values, while in reality the digital simulacrum of the Witcher is devoid of this constituent feature, as the character in such games, before a player starts to play it, is deprived of ethos. Only while getting to know the world of the game, the simulacrum of Geralt, led by the player, makes pragmatic and axiological choices and then bears their consequences. In other words, each person playing the Witcher character, builds this character again to a various degree. Sapkowski's literary character, on the other hand, has purposefully delineated and filled in personality by the author. It does not leave any room for doubt, however, that the digital simulacrum of Geralt of Rivia, a featureless character, reached greater popularity in pop culture than its literary original[14], shaped by thousands of pages of prose. In this context, Sapkowski's words quoted above could evoke a strong criticism of the author, especially by those who believe that *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* did more for the fame of the literary Geralt that the literary Witcher for the digital one. That does not mean that the commercial side should in my opinion decide on the value of the White Wolf or his simulacrum, although undoubtedly few simulacra, if any, can match the original – the literary character created by Sapkowski.

Entering the world of the game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, a player fully mediates his physicality, taking on a simulacrum, which he controls and shapes within the frames delineated by the mechanics and non-linear plot of the game. In the case of prostheses used by the disabled contestants, only the non-existing part of the body is partially mediated by a technological creation, interpreted as a part of the contestant's physicality. It does not mean that the prosthesis becomes a leg but that it functionally substitutes the lost extremity, taking on the functions of a body, at least in certain situations. The physicality of the player is liberated by the specific medium of representation, i.e. computer environment, to such an extent that it is subject to the rules far

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13   Idem.

14   The scale of the phenomenon of the computer game The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt is worth considering. The company CD Projekt RED, after the success of this game, was worth over 1 billion USD (PLN 4 billion). Moreover, on 16 March 2018 tecompany, as the first of computer game companies in Poland, entered the index of the biggest companies on the maret, WIG20. At the beginning of year 2018 that the games from th Witcher trilogy sold 25 milllion copies.

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exceeding the non-digital reality, giving the player practically unlimited possibilities of shaping it and identifying with it. In case of the Witcher, he can modify his physicality both temporarily, by using so called elixirs, and permanently, using so called mutagens, which enhance his particular physical abilities. It is also worth remembering that the White Wolf carries the stigma of infertility, as a result of the procedure of adapting his body to the job of a monster killer, or the eponymous Witcher, when he was a child.

The person of a contestant and the form of sport competition undergo the process of cultural digitalization in a varying degree, but it is not a process that can be compared to e.g. scanning paper documents or digitalizing a photo, or recording a musical piece in a digital form. The modern phenomenon of sport developed to the point in which appeared qualitatively new esport disciplines, possessing no counterparts in traditional sport. It also requires changes in the understanding of who the player is, and in particular what changes affect his or her body, which is a tool of all competition. Already, the body of a competitor in traditional, able-bodied sports allows modifications that, in fact, break some limitations resulting from inborn disability (Pistorius). The apex of this process is the full cultural digitization of the body into a simulacrum, which we begin to observe in advanced computer games, especially cRPG (the example of The Witcher analyzed above)[15].

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A. Sapkowski A., *Wiedźmin* [*The Witcher*], vol. 1–8, Warszawa 2015.

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[15] A certain analogy to the described phenomenon can be observed in the digitalization of the phenomenon of sex. There are numerous people who claim that sex can be engaged in on the Internet, or that you can even cheat this way. And since the (sexual) intercourse takes place in a bodily dimension, how can a betrayal occur via the net?

Artykuły i rozprawy

Internet resources

Andrzej Sapkowski o grze „Wiedźmin". „Znam niewiele osób, które w to grały. Obracam się wśród inteligentnych" [*Andrzej Sapkowski on the game "The Witcher". "I know few people who played. I surround myself with intelligent people"*], [in:] http://wyborcza.pl/7,75410,20616921,sapkowski-o-grze-wiedzmin-znam-niewiele-osob-ktore-w-to.html?disableRedirects=true (accessed 13.09.2020).

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